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April 10, 2015

Alaska Air Guardsmen rescue stranded hikers on glacier

JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska — Airmen with the Alaska Air National Guard have successfully rescued the three stranded hikers on Knik glacier Friday morning and transported them to an Anchorage hospital.

An HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter from the 210th Rescue Squadron with a Guardian Angel team from the 212th Rescue Squadron launched from Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson shortly after 7 a.m. Friday. Following soon after, an HC-130 from the 211th Rescue Squadron with another team of Guardian Angels also departed JBER enroute to Knik glacier.

Weather conditions have improved from earlier this week and the helicopter was able to land on the glacier. Pararescuemen reached the hikers and assessed their condition, which seems to indicate minor frostbite, before loading them onto the helicopter for transport to a hospital.

Prior to reaching the hikers, four supply bundles, one that included a radio, was dropped onto the glacier Wednesday and Thursday. The 144th Airlift Squadron dropped the parachute-rigged bundles of food, fuel and shelter in hopes to provide additional sustenance to the stranded group, but the hikers were unable to reach any of the bundles.

"They were stuck at approximately 8,500 feet in elevation," said Lt. Col. John Morse, deputy director of the Alaska Rescue Coordination Center.

Beginning early Wednesday morning, multiple attempts were also made to reach the group on the glacier, but poor weather conditions hampered their efforts.

This all started on April 3, when the group of climbers was dropped off but unable to make their scheduled pick up two days later on Sunday because of bad weather.

The climbers were forced to take shelter in an ice cave after high winds damaged their tent, Morse said. They were able to text a friend using a DeLorme inReach device that has satellite-based two-way texting capabilities. The friend was able to contact Alaska State Troopers around 11 p.m. Tuesday, who then contacted the RCC for support because of the terrain and weather conditions.

"The friend has been working directly with us to help facilitate communications," Morse explained.

The Alaska Air National Guard accepted the mission and launched an HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter and an HC-130 King aircraft, both with a team of Guardian Angels on board, out of JBER Wednesday morning.

"However, weather conditions had precluded our ability to reach the climbers," explained Morse.

Multiple attempts Wednesday and Thursday were unsuccessful due to darkness and diminished visibility because of low cloud ceilings. The HH-60 attempted to insert a team of Guardian Angels, who planned to make their way on foot to the climbers' location, but the helicopter was not able to get close enough to drop them off.

"They couldn't see the ground most times, flying in instrument conditions, surrounded by 13,000-foot peaks, attempting to drop supplies and reach the climbers who are stuck at 8,500 feet; this was a pretty complicated mission," Morse said.

The 210th, 211th and 212th Rescue Squadrons and 144th Airlift Squadron were awarded three saves for this mission.

"The crews did an incredible job battling the weather, thinking of creative ways that we could get supplies to the climbers and persevering throughout the last four days," Morse said. "Everyone was leaning forward, doing everything they could to ensure the climbers were safely rescued. The staff here at the Alaska Rescue Coordination Center also did an excellent job keeping in constant contact with the rescue crews to ensure this mission was coordinated efficiently and executed professionally."

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